

ADVENT 2020

# CHURCH @ HOME

staying connected with God,  
each other, and ourselves

## INSIDE:

COUNTDOWN TO  
CHRISTMAS:  
ADVENT WREATH

SERMONS

ADVENT REFLECTIONS  
FROM OUR COMMUNITY

PANDEMIC STORIES

## **I hope this finds you safe and well.**

And by that I guess I mean having more good moments than bad moments and staying as grounded as you can. That's a lot to ask these days, it seems. With so much going on in us and around us, all of it compounding and colliding, staying safe and well is a pretty decent mark to aim for. Know you're not alone in that; we're all feeling it too. Sometimes just knowing other people get it can make all the difference.

Here at the church we are doing our best to help people navigate this, give them some hope and meaning, and stay grounded in truths like God is With Us, Love is Bigger than Fear, and There is Always Room for Hope.

**red deer lake**  
united church

*continued . . .*

*. . . continued from Page One*

Those deserve those capital letters. They are the things that can help keep our heads above water and persevere. We're trying to do that in all kinds of ways, this care package being just one of them. As much as we lament having to change up our groove, it's been exciting (and soooo hard at times) to learn to be the church and practice faith in new ways. It forces us to ask some really important questions like, 'What does it mean to actually be the church?' and 'What's essential?' Those are some questions we'll need your help answering soon.

The good news is that our community, for the most part, is healthy. While there are still the ups and downs of life – deaths, hospital visits, and big changes – we're all weathering this the best we can. One thing we've been hearing again and again is that 'we're in this together.'

”

THE GOOD NEWS IS THAT OUR COMMUNITY, FOR THE MOST PART, IS HEALTHY.

“

Know we mean that. Get in touch if you need anything, even if it's just to chat and kill some time. Like I said, we are in this with you. We love you and are here for you.

grace and peace.  
n.



Greetings Everyone,

I hope you are keeping safe and well! The Advent Season is drawing upon us as we reflect on some of the challenges we face, both personally and collectively.

It is my hope and prayer for each of you that you will find the light of Christ in your lives and discover your own unique meaning of “the light of Christ,” of HOPE, JOY, PEACE and LOVE as you light your Advent candles this season.

Please receive these care packages knowing we share Christ’s love with you. Whatever your circumstances, know we are thinking of you, we love and miss you and are here for you. Please reach out to us, let us know if you need anything or of anyone who does . . . and do share more of your stories with us e.g. What do Advent and Christmas mean to you?

”

PLEASE RECEIVE THESE CARE PACKAGES KNOWING WE SHARE CHRIST’S LOVE WITH YOU.

“

Once again, our appreciation and gratitude to all those who have helped make these packages possible.

May your Advent be blessed with much light and love,

Vi



---

**It is Advent.** As of November 29, we're shifting into a new season. Since we're all probably going, "What?! It's Advent already?! Ugh, time is going by too fast!," let's take a sec to remember that this is good news.

Advent isn't just the four weeks before Christmas where we pretend Christmas is already here. Advent is when we get ready for Christmas. That's an important distinction. It's when we prepare to celebrate the liberating and world-changing truth that we are not alone, that this is God's world, and that we don't have to live like it isn't.

Now, I don't know about you, but I think we need some Advent these days. With everything that's going on in and around us, we need to remember that despite what it may feel and look like, that Christmas truth still holds water: God is with us, this is God's world, and we can

live like it is. That's why Advent is good news. It's the good news that something good is coming and something good is always worth getting ready for.

This magazine is to help us do just that.

Now we'll be the first to say we wish we could do this together in the church building. But since that's not an option, this is how we'll have to do it. But we'll still do it together. We trust that in some weird and wonderful way, the effect will be the same. So we invite you to use this all throughout Advent and treat it like you would church – make time for it, be intentional about it, discuss this over the phone or journal about it, and let it go to work in you, using this as a way to make the most of this Advent so you can show up at Christmas ready to say 'yes' to the life and world Jesus opens up for us.

---

## COUNTDOWN TO CHRISTMAS

One of our big traditions during Advent is counting down to Christmas by reflecting on hope, peace, joy, and love, and by lighting candles as we prepare for the Light of Christ to shine into our lives and world.

This is something we can do together at home. We invite you to make an Advent wreath at home (all you really need is five candles, but put as much creativity into it as you'd like. Send us photos!!) and make a point of following the liturgies each week.



---

## WEEK ONE



Advent is about hope.

**Hope is to trust that the worst thing is never the last thing.**

We light this candle with the hope that a light is shining in our darkness and the darkness cannot and will not overcome it.

**As we wait for Christmas, may we practice hope.**

May we not give into despair and may we be a light to others.

<<light candle>>

*God of the Impossible,  
Our world is one of injustice,  
violence, and despair.  
We don't need the news to tell us  
that.*

*We feel it too:  
we know what it's like to be  
neglected,  
we know what it's like to not be  
believed,  
we know what it's like not to be  
accepted,  
we know what it's like to struggle.  
It makes us cry out into the dark: "Is  
this it? Is this all there is?"  
But something in us dares to hope  
for something different,  
something to tell us it doesn't need  
to be this way, we don't need to live  
like that.*

*Help us listen to that voice. Let us be  
abducted by the wonder of those  
questions.*

*Help us have the audacity to hope  
for the impossible.*

*Hear us. See us. Answer us.*

*Amen.*

---

## WEEK TWO



Advent is about peace.

**Peace is to be in harmony – peace with God, each other, creation, and with ourselves.**

We light this candle to remember the peace that Christ brings to us.

**As we wait for Christmas, may we practice peace.**

May we make peace with God, each other, and with ourselves.

<<light candle>>

*Spirit of Peace,*

*We can't bear it anymore. There is so much noise.*

*There are people fighting in the streets.*

*There are children crying out in hunger.*

*There are voices telling me I'm not enough.*

*There is the anxious refrain of 'what if what if what if' repeating all night.*

*We need peace.*

*Not just the peace of quiet, but the peace of love, justice, harmony, and grace,*

*peace with you, peace with one another, and peace with ourselves.*

*Bring us this peace.*

*Make us whole.*

*Make things right.*

*Amen.*

---

## WEEK THREE



Advent is about joy.

**Joy is that spontaneous burst of laughter in the midst of tears. It is that gift which reminds us we are still alive.**

We light this candle to remember the joy God brings us in Christmas.

**May we all find, even in our tears, darkness and pain, a reason to laugh, dance, and sing.**

<<light candle>>

*God of Life,*

*Even with all the lights and glitz of Christmas around us, we certainly don't feel merry and bright.*

*We're too overcome by sadness and loss to feel it.*

*We're too blinded by our tears to see anything else.*

*God, bring us joy.*

*Bring us that feeling of being truly and fully alive.*

*Give us, even in the midst of our tears, darkness and pain, a reason to laugh, dance, and sing.*

*Let joy bring us into new life.*

*Amen.*



---

## WEEK FOUR



Advent is about love.

**Love is what holds the world together. It is the very essence and nature of God.**

We light this candle to remember that love is the way of the world.

**As we wait for Christmas, may we have the love of Christ.**

May we love God, may we love others and may we love ourselves.

<<light candle>>

*God of Extravagant and Indiscriminate Love,  
In a world of fear and hatred,  
of labels and walls,  
of shame and ridicule,  
we call on you to show us the way.  
Show us that we are enough.  
Show us that we belong.  
Show us that we are beautiful.  
Show us love,  
show us a love that heals and renews,  
and draws in and calls out,  
a love that hums with reverence.  
Show us this love and may we let it in –  
love for us, love for others, love for the world.  
Amen.*

---

# CHRISTMAS DAY



Merry Christmas!

**Christmas is when God came into our lives and world in Jesus.**

It is when we celebrate how

hope <light candle>

peace <light candle>

joy <light candle>

and love <light candle>

will always overcome despair,  
violence, sadness, and fear.

**We light this candle because Jesus is our light - showing us a new way to be human and alive in this world.** <light candle>

May we feel this light,

may we live in this light,

and may we be this light for others.

*God Who is With Us*

*As we celebrate Christmas, help us feel the power of it all.*

*Help us to know that Christmas doesn't stop here, but keeps going. May we have the courage to follow after Jesus and be his light in the world.*

*Amen.*

---

## SERMONS

Here is a collection of sermons. We've got six sermons for you (that's two bonus sermons!) all helping us reflect on Advent and how to show up for Christmas.

We invite you to read one per week, spending some time with it and seeing where it takes you.



---

## AN OPEN LETTER TO KING HEROD - REV. NICK

Dear Herod the Great, King of  
Judea, Representative of the Roman  
Empire,

Hi.

Excuse me, I'm sure 'Hi' isn't at all  
how you're supposed to address  
royalty. I guess I should begin the  
way I'm supposed to, the prescribed  
way every person within the Roman  
empire is supposed to address their  
leader:

**I worship Caesar Augustus, Son of  
God and the Prince of Peace, He is  
the one who takes away our sins  
and unites us together.**

Did I get that right? That's what  
Caesar's armies force people, I  
mean, ask people to say when  
coming into their towns and homes,  
isn't it? It's brilliant, really. Asking  
people to say that, all the while  
knowing that if they don't they'll be

beaten up, killed, or even crucified.  
Those are powerful words. They are  
what we'd call a liturgy – an  
orienting and transforming power –  
words that, even if they aren't  
believed, can shape a person's  
reality just by saying them over and  
over and over. In this case, it shapes  
their reality into yours: the imperial  
reality. This reality of the Pax  
Romana, "the peace of Rome,"  
where peace is kept through the  
threat of violence, where life is  
about getting in line or getting on  
the cross, where the Caesar is god,  
Empire is home, and oppression  
isn't technically oppression because  
that's simply the way the world  
works – there's no other alternative,  
no other peace, god, or world out  
there!

For those of us with the boot on our  
neck, that reality makes for a pretty  
thin and bleak existence. But that's  
the brilliance of the whole thing,

isn't it? Forcing people to say it keeps them from doing the dangerous things like dreaming and hoping. And in an empire, whether it's yours or the empires of consumerism, celebrity, nationalism, and perfectionism that we live under today, dreaming and hoping are the last things you want to happen. A healthy and subversive imagination is all it takes to rock the boat, crack the veneer, and show just how temporal and fragile all that power really is.

I guess that sums up your job: keep the peace by squashing the hope, stopping the dreams, and killing the imagination. Keep it by any means possible. That kind of explains why you did what you did on Christmas, doesn't it? No wonder you freaked out when you heard those rumours about a new kind of king being born to create a new kind of world.

Which, I know, wasn't anything new.

You've crucified would-be rulers before. But it was different this time, wasn't it?

This king and kingdom wasn't from some nation next door, it was coming from the wilderness, from a place you didn't and couldn't control. This king and kingdom wasn't from some rebel group, it was from God, and not just any god, but the same God known for overthrowing empires, this God that had once swept away the powerful Egyptian armies, liberating the people into new life.

Could you feel this God moving? Could you feel the air being rearranged? Could you feel a reverence sweeping through the city?

I'd be threatened and scared by all that. We all would. Nobody likes change, even change that needs to happen. Nobody likes their power

and control being threatened, even when that's for the best. But this? This wasn't just change, this was revolution and apocalypse, this was about the undoing of *everything* and the beginning of something *new*:

A new kind of King, the real son of God, the real prince of peace, this Jesus that doesn't make Himself known through oppressive power but through extravagant and indiscriminate love, who doesn't enslave you with scripts and labels but who frees you to be yourself. A new Kingdom, the real kind of world, this world where peace isn't kept through violence, this world that's continually getting more diverse at the very same time it's getting more united, this world that is a joyful and open existence for anyone and everyone. I'm writing to you because that's what we celebrate at Christmas. Christmas is all about revelling in the coming of that new king and kingdom. It's

about rejoicing that there is a new way to be human and alive in this world. It's about embracing that new reality and rejecting the old one by saying:

**I worship Jesus the Christ, Son of God and the Prince of Peace, He is the one who takes away our sins and unites us together.**

Those are powerful words. It's a new kind of liturgy that leads to a new kind of orientation, one that shapes us into people who say 'no' to the ways of empire, and 'yes' to a life and world that's free and full of hope, joy, peace and love.

So, your majesty, I guess all that is to ask: 'How will you be spending Christmas this year?'

Will you join the rest of us at the manger, greeting this new existence with subversive joy and excitement, or

will you stay where you are, holding on to the fleeting power you have, ignoring this light that's shining, this light that leads us home?

Hope to see you there as there's space for everyone.

Merry Christmas.



---

## AN OPEN LETTER TO THE INN KEEPER - REV. NICK

Dear Inn Keeper,

It's a bit strange to write to you because well, I'm not even sure you exist. I mean, despite your ubiquity in Christmas pageants over the centuries, you're actually not in any of the Bible stories. Your Inn is there, but you? You're left behind the scenes and in between the words, assumed and implied. But in any case, you're part of the story as much as any of the others, and thank God for that because your story, your small and implied part

in this greatest story ever told, is one I think we all need to hear and pay more attention to.

Even though the story doesn't tell us much – anything, really – about you, it's not hard for us to imagine:

You're there, running frantically around the fully-booked Inn, looking after all those people who have come back for the census, all needing a place to stay. It must have been bananas! Beds to make,

sheets to wash, water to carry, food to make, poop to scoop, animals to feed, floors to scrub, wake up calls to make. It makes me tired just thinking about it.

**Isn't it crazy how life can become just a list of things? I'm sure half way through the night you became a blur, one so fuzzy you couldn't see or hear much of anything.**

I think we know that feeling. Lots of us, probably all of us if we're honest, get lost in that blur from time to time. Just replace 'the inn' with jobs, looking for work, caring for families, volunteer commitments, doctor appointments, and that's not even to mention all the stuff we feel obligated to do during the holidays, plus the things which rent out the space in our heads like navigating a pandemic, anti-racism work, gun violence, refugee crises, and God

knows what else. Yup, we too know what it's like to become a blur, one so fuzzy we can't see or hear much of anything.

Is that the state you were in? It's hard to blame you given what was going on. If we can cut ourselves some slack, we can certainly cut you some. It certainly helps make you out to be less the one who said 'No room!' to a very pregnant woman, and more the one who simply wasn't present, who wasn't awake, who was so lost they didn't see the one thing they *needed* to see:

**the world beginning to shift, the darkness begin to fade, and that God, Love itself, had arrived in our world for anyone and everyone to experience.**

Did you ever wake up? Did you ever realize what had happened that night? Was it when you saw the light



streaming through the stable doors? Was it when you saw the angel wings poking out of your guests' jackets as they checked out the next day? Was it when the couple with the new baby, suddenly refugees, fled in the morning? Did you ever stop to realize? Did you ever see clearly?

**Which I guess are the questions we need to ask ourselves.**

This advent season, will we slow down? We will choose to be a blur or will we choose to wake up to the

one thing we all need to see on Christmas morning:

**the world beginning to shift, the darkness begin to fade, and that God, Love itself, has arrived in our world for anyone and everyone to experience.**

I hope we see you and hear your story this Christmas. We need it. We need it to remind ourselves to slow down, say 'no' to things, and open up to the beauty of Christmas and to let it change everything. Merry Christmas.



---

## AN OPEN LETTER TO THE SHEPHERDS - REV. NICK

To the Shepherds of the Greater  
Bethlehem Area,

How are you guys doing?

As we head into another Christmas season and we take time out to listen to the Nativity story, which is, of course, your story, I thought I'd shoot you a letter.

You'll have to excuse me for the very generalized 'To the Shepherds of the GBA' beginning. I'm not trying to be disrespectful – I just don't know your names. From the info we have, all we know is that there was more than one of you there on that first Christmas. Which I guess shouldn't be too surprising; not only would it have been awkward for the writer of the story to list all your names, but given your status at that time, your names wouldn't have been important because well, you weren't seen as

important enough to be given that kind of dignity.

Shepherds were seen to be some of the most deplorable people in your world. And let's be clear here: we're not talking about the job, we're talking about the you, the people, the ones who do the job. Because of what you did for a living, you all were seen as the lowest of the low and the worst of the worst, some of the most marginalized and dismissed people of your time.

That must have been so ... so desolating.

That's the only word I can come up with to capture what it'd be like to be cut off from community, have people avoid you because of who you are and what you do, and for what it'd be like to be told there isn't room in God's world for people like you.

I mean, I know there are people here today who'd get this because all of that is a daily occurrence for them, but in my own privilege, I can't even begin to imagine what life must have been like for you.

But this is the stuff we need to hear because the picture we have of you guys is usually one of you're all lounging about on some hillside under a tree at night, watching over the sheep, chasing off wolves with your curvy sticks, eating apples with a knife like cool grandpas do, and living life "off the grid" as we say it. It's a very romantic kind of picture. But the truth is, it was anything but romantic: you guys were sitting on that hillside, hungry, dirty and exhausted, staring off into the distance towards the place you once called home, longing for connection and community, longing for identity and purpose, and feeling, like you do on every night, that it's feeling especially dark out.

Were you feeling all that the night it happened? You know what I mean by 'it,' right? Of course you do. Nothing else but 'it' could capture the craziness, the mystery, and the reverence of that night. We're talking about the moment the angels appeared, and not just angels – entire *choruses* of angels.

How many are in a chorus of angels? Is that the official name for a group of angels? Was it blindingly bright and deafeningly loud or was it more radiant and beautiful? Angels are way better at blending in these days so I have a lot of questions.

But however it was, it must have been terrifying and confusing. I mean, you must have assumed that the angels made some mistake. But then, after the initial shock wore off and they didn't leave after checking their map, maybe you realized it wasn't a mistake, that they were in the right place, and that they were

there to give you a message from God:

**this message of a saviour ... this person who'd show us a new way to be human and alive in the world ... this life and world where you and everyone else who was kicked out and forgotten would finally have a place and a name; this message that God is coming to be with us and for us ... coming to repair and restore ... to liberate and make new ... and to show how to love and live together in peace.**

Did you believe it at first? How long did it take for you to realize this was *actually* happening, that God *was* doing this, that *this* message was being given to *you*? A *shepherd*. How liberating was that?! What did that feel like?!

No wonder you ran to Bethlehem to see that baby lying in a manger.

And what was *that* like?!

To be some of the first people to experience Jesus – to experience God incarnate – to experience God being with us and for us?

Could you see in him God's presence? Could you feel in him God's love for the world? Could you feel the reverence just humming around him? Could you sense in him the community, name, and belonging you were longing for?

It must have changed everything.

**To know that God is with you and for you, to know that you have a place, a name, and value, to know that this light is more powerful than the darkness ... how could it *not* change everything?!**

And I guess *that's* why we need to hear your story. Cause the thing it teaches us about Christmas is that it does change everything, especially for those of us who are also shepherds – those of us who,

even in our privilege, don't have names, who feel forgotten and unseen, who long for connection, community, and belonging, and who feel like each day is especially dark. For those of us like shepherds, it's a story that changes everything, because it's a story that tells us: God has come to earth to show us that we are loved, we belong, and we matter.

Hopefully, as we go through Advent and we take time to listen to your story, this is what we will hear. Hopefully we will let it sink in and

so when we arrive, just like you did, at the manger on Christmas, we can experience the love, reverence, and liberation of it all and have it change everything, drawing us into the kind of life and world we were always created to have.

So Shepherds ... thanks for your story. Thanks for opening up that truth and beauty to us and showing us how to show up on Christmas morning.

Merry Christmas.



---

## AN OPEN LETTER TO JOSEPH - REV. NICK

Dear Joe,

Can I call you Joe?

I'd understand if you'd prefer Joseph or 'Mr. The Carpenter from Nazareth.' Truth is, we really don't know too much about you at all. We hear about you when Jesus was born but that's pretty much it. You just disappear from the story. Which is a shame because I'm sure you'd have lots of stories to tell. I mean, you did raise Jesus.

Woah. There's a Trinitarian mind job for you. If you raised Jesus who is God Incarnate, that makes you God's Step-Dad?

Anyway.

Why am I writing you? Well, it's almost Christmas and a bunch of us down here are reading your story and it's quite a story.

There you are. You're probably in your late teens. You're a carpenter and you're engaged to the girl of your dreams but then one day she shows up at your house and tells you she's pregnant. But before you can react and say there's no way it's your kid, she says not to worry, it's God's kid. An angel told her. She's going to give birth to God's baby and he will be the Messiah.

An Angel? The Messiah? God's baby? You got to give her points for originality. Don't get me wrong, I'm all for God moving in mysterious ways but if I were you and my *virgin* girlfriend showed up and said the same thing, my first thought would be, 'This would make a great podcast: 'Raising the Messiah with a Virgin Mary.' But you ... you're a bit more compassionate than I am apparently.

There's a reason Matthew uses the word 'righteous' to describe you. You obviously loved Mary and wanting to save her from shame and disgrace, so you planned to break off the engagement quietly. And I respect that. You'd have been completely justified to do otherwise. You were, no doubt, getting bombarded with messages from your town, family and buddies to get the heck out of the relationship, to ditch her, go find a girl who is a bit more ... faithful. Well, poor choice of phrase, but you know what I mean.

But here's a question for you: Were you reluctant at all? Did just a part of you wonder if Mary was telling the truth? Did you wonder if this actually was God doing something new? Did you remember the passages from Isaiah about a child and wonder 'Could this be *that* kid?' I ask because, well, it seems to me you chose to sleep on it. It's still

something we do when tough decisions need to be made. And it's then that you had your dream. *The* dream. The dream that changed your life forever.

What was that dream like? Do you remember it all? Was it scary? Comforting? A mixture of both?

I always imagined the dream being of you on your way to dump Mary. You've got a third person's perspective on it. You watch yourself going to Mary's home. You're walking extra slow because you love her and hate that this is happening, but you keep telling yourself 'This is what I'm supposed to do, it's what everyone has been telling me to do. This is the right decision.' But as soon as you say that, you experience something else deep down within you, this sense of wonder pushing back against it all.

But then you turn the corner and there's this guy leaning against a fence smoking a cigarette. Right away you know he's an angel. He's shimmering the way only angels do and there's feathers sticking out from underneath his trench coat. Obviously, this is the angel's first gig on earth because his disguise is horrible. The angel, he sees you, calls you over, kind of like that guy on Sesame Street who sold letters, and as he speaks you recognize his voice to be the same one as that voice of wonder within you, and before you can connect that those doubts were actually God speaking into your life, the angel tells you: 'Don't be afraid. Take Mary as your wife. The child she is having is the Saviour the world is waiting for. Name him Jesus for he will be God among you.' And with that, the angel walked off coughing because as everyone knows, angels don't smoke. And then you woke up and went: 'Ok. Let's do this' and you stayed with her.

I think most of us hear this message in a different way than you did. We often think the angel is referring to himself when he says 'Don't be afraid.' Angel disguises are better these days and to us it's a scary thought to be confronted by one of God's messengers. But the angel wasn't talking about himself, was he? He was referring to something even scarier: trusting and following God. And you, despite all the reasons we could think of not to, said 'yes' to God and chose to trust and follow.

What amazes me, Joe, and is the reason I'm really writing you, is how you're this background character in the Christmas Story, yet you show us what to do when we find ourselves caught between the competing messages we hear on Christmas.



We say 'No' to the messages that Christmas is about shopping and buying and doing. We say 'No' to the messages that Christmas is passé and irrelevant. We say 'No' to the message that Christmas is a horrible time of year. And we say 'yes' to the miracle and craziness of Jesus' birth. We say 'Yes' to the Light in our Darkness. We say 'Yes' to God's call for each of us to welcome that True Love into the world and grow it as our own so Love can save the world.

While we're on the other end of the story of Jesus, we're not too different from you in what God calls us to do with Jesus. We say: 'Yes I'm in. Let's do this.'

That is a scary thing but we do it anyway, knowing and trusting that God is behind this, and that experiencing True Love is so incredibly worth it.

So maybe it's okay that we don't hear about you. Maybe that was your plan all along. Maybe that's the point. You did what God called you to do but let Jesus take the spotlight because he's what Christmas is about.

So, all that to say, thanks for showing us what we say on Christmas when we find ourselves at the manger. Thanks for showing us how we say yes to the message of a saviour, let Him raise us as We raise him, and bring Jesus out into our worlds, letting True Love out for everyone to see.

Merry Christmas.

---

## AN OPEN LETTER TO MARY - REV. NICK

Dear Mary,

You don't know me. Well, I don't think you do at least. My Catholic friends may beg to differ on that. But in any case, I know you. A lot of people know about you, actually. You're pretty famous. You're one of the few people on earth who is universally known by just your first name. The others are mostly rock stars ... and Jesus. And Moses ... Abraham ... Sarah ... and well, most Bible people, but you get my point.

Oddly though, for being super famous, we don't know a lot about you. Just a few stories but even then the details are pretty sparse. But we know enough to know you're more than simply 'Jesus' mother.' We know enough about you to call you a saint, to see you as someone to go to with our prayers, as someone to see as a role model, and as someone who inspires

paintings, poems, and songs. You're all of that and more because of how it all went down nine months before Jesus arrived on the scene. I mean, if we think the lead up to Christmas is stressful, it must have been worse for you.

There you are, a teenager, engaged to a nice young guy named Joseph, life is coming together for you, it's all exciting and wonderful and then ... and then it happened: the angel showed up and your lives took an unexpected turn.

What was that like?

Were you just minding your own business when BAM! there was this angel all shiny and glorious by your side? Did the angel just look like some random stranger until they dramatically threw off an oversized jacket that was concealing their wings and light? Or was it only

afterwards that you realized that person you spoke with was actually a messenger from God? Was it similar to Joe's experience? What did it feel like? I obviously have a lot of questions because as far as I know I've never had an angel visit me.

But in any case, how they introduced themselves seems to be just so nonchalant considering who they were.

*"Greetings, favoured one! The Lord is with you!"*

I mean, usually angels begin with 'Don't be afraid!' or something to ease the fact that a big white-winged glowing creature just flew down from the heavens. But he didn't. He began with calling you 'the favoured one of God'

Is that why you were confused?

Or maybe you were confused because you recognized this kind of greeting. It's how fantastic people of faith were greeted. People like Moses, Abraham, Sarah, and Ruth. But you ... you were just .... not to be mean, but you were just ordinary. You were just a poor teenage girl from the middle of nowhere. And if that's the case, maybe it's more accurate to say you weren't so much confused as you were in awe. You were in awe that God had seen you and saw you fit to be called 'favoured one.'

No doubt you began to wonder where it was all going and that's when the angel told you God's plan. If we were in your shoes, this is where the story would have ended. I'd have either backed away slowly or died from a panic attack. I think most of us down here would be like that. But you? You were different. What was going through your head and heart? Did you understand the

weight of God's request right away or was it only after, while doing the dishes or something, that it fully hit you? I mean seriously, all at once you learned that God was literally coming into the world to be among us, to love us, to show us what it means to be human, and transform everything and everyone ... AND ... that this plan hinged on you. It would be you ... you! this ordinary girl from nowhere ... that would be the one to bring it all into the world. You were the one God was asking to do it through.

And if that's not mind-blowing and bananas enough, without hesitation you said, **'I'm in. Here I am. Let's do this.'**

That, Mary, is why we call you a saint. That's why you inspire artists and poets. That's why people seek you in prayer. This is why we still talk about you. It's because you said 'yes.'

But here's the thing ...

While that blows our minds and makes you stand out in this Christmas story, I'd bet if you were here today and we all came up to you, all shocked and amazed at this display of faithfulness and willingness, asking, 'How did you do that?!', you would just shrug your shoulders and turn the question back on us, asking: 'What other option was there? God was inviting me to be a part of something beautiful! God was asking me to do my part to bring hope, joy, peace, and love into the world. How could I say no?!'

And it's there we get to see just why you were a favoured one of God, why it probably took you all of zero seconds to say 'Yes.' You remembered that God always uses the ordinary to do the extraordinary and that even someone like you could help God change the world.

And if we ever had any doubt, we then hear it in the song you sang with your relative Elisabeth. We call it the Magnificat today. It's this song of seeing the liberating, revolutionary, restorative, grace-filled work that God is going to do in the world and seeing it as something you need to be a part of. Which makes it a song of faith, really. It's the same kind of faith we need to have today – this faith that sees the work God is doing and which says 'yes' to it, regardless of the cost.

I guess that's the lesson for us as we head to Christmas. Your story reminds us to see that at Christmas God is asking us the same thing as They asked you: "Do you want in on this? Do you want to be a part of it?" I can only hope that we'll all be so taken, in awe, and blown away by these plans that we'll say, **"I'm in. Here I am. Let's do this."**

So to you, Mary, thank you for that reminder of what we're to do on Christmas morning.

Merry Christmas!



---

# HOW TO SHOW UP AT CHRISTMAS: A HOW-TO GUIDE FROM THE MAGI - REV. NICK

## **God be with you!**

One of the things we say every year is that Advent isn't just this time of counting down to Christmas but it goes deeper and is more spiritual than that:

**Advent is a time set aside where we do what we need to do to show up on Christmas morning so we can embrace everything Christmas is.**

Cause that's the thing to remember, isn't it? That Christmas isn't just something we celebrate. It's not just something that happened – it's something that happens. Christmas is when we behold a fundamental truth and reality: **that God is here, with us and for us, transforming everything into something new.** And because it's that, Christmas really is this invitation to get in on

the action, arriving at the manger ready to join in with that Spirit that's making all things new.

One of the ways people have done that in our tradition over the past two thousand years is to reflect on the people in the Christmas story – characters like Mary, Joseph, and the Shepherds – and ask, 'What do they tell us about getting ready for Christ? What do they tell us about the posture, attitude, disposition, or mindset we need to have come Christmas morning?' And today we hear from the last people to show up at the manger – the Magi.

Now typically when we hear about these characters we hear that there are three of them and that they are Kings, but that tradition developed *after* the story was written. Matthew calls them 'Magi' which essentially means non-Jewish wisdom seekers.

Think of them as astrologers, mystics, philosophers, or poets. They were people who were always looking for a deeper understanding of life; people who would look to the stars for signs of what's happening in the Universe, who would always strive to be open to the idea that anything is possible, always working hard at being ready to grow, change, and become. It's these kinds of people who showed up at the manger. Now why did they show up? **We're told they saw a star in the sky - this star that told them a new king was being born.**

So they see the star and they head out, maybe together, maybe they meet up along the way, we really don't know, but what we are told is where they came from: **"From far in the east."**

Now we could take this quite literally. You can hear it that way. That's fine and it works. But we can also go a bit further with it because the writers of this story are making a pretty deep point by including this bit of info. To say someone was coming "far from the east" wasn't just geographical; it's to say that they came from somewhere *completely* different. It was to say, as we say back home, "they're from away."

The Magi were 'other.' They were outsiders. They were people from a totally different worldview, practice, and tradition: they weren't Jewish, they weren't middle eastern, they didn't know what a Messiah or a Christ was, everything Christmas was about - all its hopes, expectations, and meanings, all its imagery and language - it would have been brand. new. to. them.

All they knew is that a star was shining and that meant something to them. It hummed with a reverence and it had a weight. So they took off after it, travelling maybe a year or two, leaving behind everything they knew, moving across half of the known world, entering into this land that was completely foreign and new, and doing it all in this attempt to chase it down and experience this new thing the Universe was doing. And, as the story goes, when they finally arrived, all we're told is they offered some gifts, bowed down to little toddler Jesus, and then "left in a different way than they came."

So with their story in mind, the question we're asking is: **'What do they tell us about how to show up at Christmas? What do they teach us about the mindset, the disposition, the attitude that we need to have when we arrive at the manger?'**

There are lots of ways we could answer that, but there's one thing that these Magi can offer us better than any of the others, and it's one of those spiritual lessons that sounds super easy but in reality is really hard but so incredibly important. So what do they say about showing up?

**They tell us we need to show up open.**

Showing up open is a hard thing to do. It's hard to be people who show up ready to experience and embrace something new because the alternative is just so easy. It's just so easy to be closed off. It's so easy to be people with set ideas of what to believe, of how things work, how it's done, and what is right and proper. Whether we're talking about Christmas or anything else for that matter, it's so comfortable to think, "Well, this is what it is, and this is how we celebrate it, and this is



what it means for me.” It means we never have to be challenged, think or feel too hard, be surprised or shocked, feel lost, or have to break a sweat. **It’s so easy because it’s just so neat and tidy.**

Anyone know what I mean?

But here’s the thing about that and here’s where the challenge kicks in:

As people trying to be human and alive in this world, as people trying to find life that’s true, full, and deep, that’s lined up with what Jesus is all about, here’s the thing we have to remember:

**nothing good, reverent, and real in life is ever neat and tidy. nothing life-giving ever comes without some sweat.**

Whether we’re talking about relationships, money, justice, politics, but especially faith and

spirituality, nothing is ever neat and tidy. It’s always going to be messy and complicated.

It's always going to have some tension to it. It’s all going to require some effort and work. Our job in life, the spiritual task if you will, isn’t to swing to either side, trying to get rid of it all, but rather to do the hard work of learning to *live within the tension*, of recognizing that life is uncomfortable and messy, and that our job isn’t to escape it, but learn how to navigate through it.

Are ya with me?

And that’s where the lesson of the Magi comes in. **When we arrive at Christmas, we’re invited to leave behind the neat and tidy and step into the tension by arriving open.** Instead of just staying home, instead of staying rooted in wherever we are, we’re invited to be

brave and bold and leave everything we know behind so we can show up ready to experience something new, ready to be pulled out of what we know and are familiar with into something strange and uncomfortable, ready to have everything turned upside down, ready to be challenged and inspired by what we experience, and ready to, just as the Magi did, leave different.

Which is maybe where the magic really lies. That line about "leaving different" may just be the most important line in the whole story. Christmas causes us to leave different. It changes us. It better change us. How can it not? If we don't leave different, we're not doing it right.

**We need to show up ready and willing to be transformed by what we've opened ourselves up to, and ready to go and live it out wherever we go.**

So with all this in mind, the question for each of us is: 'What do you have to do during Advent to show up open? What are you discovering about Christmas that is challenging and new? What do the truths about Christmas, that God is here, with us and for us, transforming everything into something new, cause you to rethink? What do you need to put down? What do you need to wrestle with? What do you need to surrender to? What needs to be shaken up in your world? What mess do you need to make?' Those are the questions for us to rumble with this week.

And as we wrestle with them and our answers begin to rise up, let's be daring and own them. Let's be courageous and do the work. I mean, that's what this season is for. That's why we're here doing this. Sit with your answers and trust that the struggle will make Christmas that much more powerful.

---

## DOGS, DOMESTICATION, AND ADVENT - REV. NICK

I want to introduce you to someone.

This is our dog, Leroy.



He enjoys eating, getting his butt scratched, and pretending to be a human.

And as I've learned to love him, I've begun to ask things like: Why is it that he can read my smallest facial expression and why can he increase his level of cuteness right after he does something bad?

So I wondered, where did Leroy come from?

The traditional school of thought has said humans domesticated wolves. That we somehow **caught, tamed, and trained** wolves to hunt and protect us and over the years they evolved into dogs like Leroy. Makes sense right? But what researchers are beginning to realize is that we may have that backwards: it was actually wolves that caught, tamed, and trained us. Wolves, the theory goes, may have had a role in the domestication of humans.

The new school of thought is that wolves began to follow early nomadic tribes around because they could get easy meals from the garbage and scraps humans would throw behind their camps; and humans began to learn that these wolves were like a primitive security system, not only barking at other predators who'd want to have the garbage and scraps too, but also barking at rival tribes in this attempt to protect the hand was

effectively feeding them. Over the years, this increased safety and security caused humans to stay longer in one place, which eventually allowed them to build places to safely store their food, which eventually became permanent settlements, which eventually became the beginnings of civilization as we know it. Dogs, the researchers now argue, were one of the main catalysts behind human domestication, that very quick shift from a hunter and gatherer society to the settled human civilization that we know today. And all of it thanks to Leroy's great great great great great great uncle.

And if we ever were to doubt about the power dogs have over us, all you'd need to see is this:



That's my view from the car whenever we go somewhere as a family.

And as I learned more and more about that, I began to see that other things have domesticated us.

Take seeds for example.

One of catalysts behind the agricultural revolution is the idea that we humans could catch, tame, and train the world around us. With dreams of lives of luxury and freedom, we went about clearing land, building farms, planting seeds and creating a whole economy around it. But that life of luxury and

freedom never panned out – the very opposite happened. Working the fields was actually more work than hunting and gathering, a less diverse diet led to greater amount of disease, the new economy led to higher rates of crime and violence, traditional gender roles became “traditional” gender roles, and social classes became more and more entrenched. And over the course of only a few generations this kind of life stuck, becoming just the way it is.

What it all tells us is that in our attempt to domesticate the world, we’re the ones who ended up being domesticated. We don't even have to look back in time to see this, we can see it happening now. In an attempt to catch, tame and train different things around us, we’re the ones who end up feeling trapped, stuck, and oppressed in habits, systems, and cultures which bend us to be certain ways, which keep us trapped and confined,

which redefine our place in the world and adjust our value, which remove us from life as it was meant to be.

I’m sure we could each name something that has caught, tamed, and trained us, which has domesticated us into a life we never wanted in the first place:

We could name the crippling fear of not meeting someone’s expectations but continually striving to do so even if it’s not the life we want for ourselves.

We could name being stuck on the treadmill of debt because our culture says having more and more leads to happiness and who doesn’t want happiness?

We could name hiding our true sexualities because we’re told that’s not “normal” or name how we stick to certain jobs and roles because “that’s what women do.”

We could name how, in our quest to be productive, we're the ones who are now enslaved to our phones, computers, and gadgets.

We could go on, couldn't we?

And I bring it all up today because it's important for us to talk about things like this. It's important to talk about it because it's things like this that have helped create a life and world where we're caught, tamed and trained, a life and world that feels off and wrong, a life and world full of that spiritual disease of despair – that conviction that tomorrow and every day after that is going to be just like today.

We talk about it here because we are the people who dare to dream otherwise. We talk about it because we're the people whose faith tells them that we don't have to live like that because a new kind of life and world is possible. We talk about it because we believe in one of the most powerful forces out there: hope.

It all makes me think of this story in the Bible. It's this story about a guy named John the Baptist. You can read it here: [Matt 3:1-12](#).

I think about it because John's world was also a world that knew despair. It was under the thumb of the Roman Empire – a world where peace was kept through death and violence, where your worth depended on your pedigree, income, and label, and where hope didn't exist so you never dreamed about having anything more or different. It was a world that was caught, tamed, and trained by power, oppression, and violence.

One of the things we're told about John is that he had a message about a new kind of king and saviour and that he came **out of the wilderness**.

What's the wilderness?

**It's a place that hasn't been domesticated. It's a place that hasn't been co-opted by the government, culture, and religion. It's a place that hasn't been caught, tamed or trained. It's a wild place. The wilderness is a place that's very different from the world we live in.**

So if John is coming from the wilderness, if this saviour and Kingdom he's talking about is coming out of the wilderness, what's that tell us? What are the writers of this story trying to say?

It tells us that there is another way and world out there, a way and a world that is so completely different from anything we know.

Jesus called this way and world 'the Kingdom' but you can call it whatever you want.

It's a world Jesus tells us that's like a mustard seed – a world that's inclusive and expansive; that's like a vineyard – a world that's fair and just for everyone; that's like a party – a world that's full of joy. It's a life, Jesus tells us, where the last are first, where you can be you, where you can be free, where hope, joy, peace and love flow. It's a life and world, Jesus tells us, that was always meant to be, a world and life God always intended us to have.

Christmas is about the coming of that way and world. It's about a new kind of life we can experience. It's about the holy wilderness coming to untame and untrain everything that is wrong and off and show us a new way to live, a new way to order the world.

Christmas is God's answer to our despair. It's this message that tells us: You don't have to live like that. Tomorrow is a new day. A new kind of world is here, follow me and find

life as it was meant to be.

So, as Advent people, as people journeying towards Christmas, the question becomes:

Are you ready to break out of that which confines and traps you to experience life full and eternal? Are you ready to wake up and step into the wild and divine world growing around you? Are you ready to be set free?

Amen.





---

## ADVENT REFLECTIONS FROM OUR COMMUNITY

### I'M STARTING A PAINTING

of Mary and Joseph right now. Modern thinkers speculate that Mary would have been younger than renaissance painters depicted her. I have asked my youngest teenage granddaughter to pose. Hold that thought.

Someone gave me a toque with Haida images on the band, which initiated a conversation with Alex, a homeless Metis man, and his girlfriend Stacie. "That's Stacie with an ie," she told me before lifting the half-filled pop bottle of ochre liquid to swig. She has an openness and naivete in her toothless smile and eyes. They collect bottles in the area to support their habit.

In the summer I've seen them asleep on the lawn in the shade of the poplar trees in front of the TD bank. Stacie has two pink patches around her left eye which I thought were from sunburn or frost bite,



but she told me they appeared after the births of two children. She is 46 years old and when I ran into her last week she had shingles. "All down my spine and in my scalp. I'm on antibiotics," she said. She had a prescription from the Drop-in Centre.

So now you're probably wondering: Where's the connection between Mary the biblical figure, and Stacie the homeless woman? Well, both occupy my thoughts but also embody a message of hope. Hope is the "yin" to the "yang" of despair. But neither are despairing. Mary is very pregnant, unwed in a society that didn't value unwed women and on the move to respond to a census decree. At this point, she is as homeless as Stacie. Labour in first pregnancies can be long but the chroniclers are male and for a myriad of reasons don't go there. Mary is about to give birth to a son who will manifest a new relationship between man and God and herein lies the "hope" Mary introduces into the world.

Last month Stacie beamed at me that she was getting new dentures. She had missed one appointment because she was in jail and another because she just couldn't get

there (living on the street can put a kink into schedules, I surmise) but she made the third appointment and things were now in place. The next time we would meet she had her new teeth and told me she and Alex had found a place to live. They would lose this place like others before it.

Last week she had a place lined up again and although Alex had found a job at a recycling depot, he would be laid off over Christmas. "Oh, and I've got a cellphone so I can stay in touch with Alex. We lost each other for two weeks and then when I was coming back from church I found him by McDonalds. I really want to cook a turkey for Christmas." Like Mary, Stacie exudes hope for a better life. I bought a Superstore gift card hoping to make her dream a reality but couldn't find her this week.

If for some reason she doesn't have a place to stay or didn't get to cook that turkey dinner, I pray that when I encounter her next, she is still holding on to that hope. As for me, I'm still hoping for a better relationship with God through Stacie and Mary.

Carry each other, friends. There are a couple of Marys in the biblical texts but on the streets of our cities there are so many Stacies.

- *Larry Stilwell*

## SCARCITY

Friends embrace  
their inner baker,  
bakeries adapt.  
My search for pumpernickel  
becomes a recovery mission.  
Ahead of me  
nestled in a customer order  
a round baked shape,  
Pumpernickel  
my inner voice proclaimed.  
My pandemic brain wants to  
claim ownership  
while my conscience wrestles,  
a laugh emerges  
it has identified the shape  
as a banana loaf.

- *Larry Stilwell*





## A MEMORY FROM 2003

### **Blessing: To endow with a gift.**

Using this definition as a starting point, it wasn't hard to see how I was blessed prior to Christmas 2003. My children and grandchildren were gifts. They made me blessed. Although the former, at different times in my life, had slipped from the list of 'gift' status, they were back on. I'm sure they could say the same of me. My beloved dog had never slipped from the status of 'gift.'

Prior to Christmas, my son and I took the dog for a run in Fish Creek Park. There she was permitted to run free. She was part border collie and preordained to run from side to side and always circle back to us. Sometimes the Labrador part of her took over and the circle became elliptical, getting out of hand. This day however she had her nose close to the ground searching for field mice, so she completely missed the herd of deer. They blended wonderfully in the thick brush. My son and I stopped to marvel. Fifty feet separated us from the five doe and a fawn standing motionless, staring at us. I had talked to my son earlier in the week about how I might visually represent being blessed. Seeing the deer made me realize that the smallest things may be considered a blessing if we let them.

---

## PANDEMIC STORY 1

In April to June during the pandemic, I had nothing to do. My student teaching was lost when the schools closed. I got to graduate university but it felt more sad than celebratory. There were no teacher job prospects in sight.

When Werklund's Service Learning department set up a volunteer-tutor coordinating system, I jumped on it. That spring I volunteered with six different students and it hardly took me more than a month to build up 100 hours of tutoring time. By the end of the summer I'd volunteer-tutored over 150 hours.

The students I worked with were often doing work in school that their families didn't feel prepared to support them with – French Immersion, high school subjects, math – so it was just perfect for

me to step in and get to see those subjects. I learned a lot and was so happy to have something positive to lean into during those first uncertain months.

- *Kessa Den Hoed*



## PANDEMIC STORY 2

How does one respond in the face of a challenge like the present pandemic? It has been said that times like these bring out the best and the worst in people. What I'm currently witnessing makes me glad I belong to a church community, and in particular to the RDLUC community.

My husband and I make care package deliveries each month to seven recipients. I don't need to name them—only to state that, without exception, they have told me how much they appreciate and eagerly await that monthly delivery package. Here's a sampling of the comments:

- 'How amazing! So many hands and talents obviously go into this!'
- 'How can I thank everyone? A card doesn't seem enough.'
- 'I've never belonged to a church that showed such support during times of stress.'

- 'I get lonely because I live alone. These deliveries are like a lifeline!'
- 'The wonderful food warms my heart and soul as well as my tummy.'
- 'The literature packet helps me feel connected—and the caring stones and other craft creations help me feel comforted.'
- 'I'm not certain I deserve special treatment because I'm ill. But in one delivery, I got a 'Chemo Care Bag' AND a 'Caring Hugs Bag', along with the usual delicious food and the church packet. The Congregational Care team at RDLUC is truly amazing!'

There's nothing more that I can add to all this—except to say it's an honour and a privilege to make deliveries that inspire such comments. To all who contribute to putting together those packages, God bless you for your time, your talents, and your giving spirits.

- *Fran Porter*

## DO YOU HAVE A STORY TO SHARE?

A memory? A poem?

A photograph?

A pandemic story?

We would love to share it  
in the next issue of this magazine.

Deadline to submit to the next issue  
of Church @ Home:  
November 30

Please send your submission to  
[info@reddeerlakeuc.com](mailto:info@reddeerlakeuc.com)  
or call us at (403) 256-3181.

*The Ministry & Personnel team and Colleen Micklethwaite announce that Colleen will be retiring from her position as Administrative Coordinator at Red Deer Lake United Church at the end of June 2021 to spend more time with her daughters. Closer to her departure date, we'll hear more from Colleen about her time at RDLUC and what her future plans are. In the meantime, M&P and the Board will be looking at how best to fill this important role going forward. We wish Colleen all the very best as she plans this transition!*





**We are  
Red Deer Lake United Church.**

We are an inclusive and affirming community of faith – people of all ages, perspectives, and stories, who gather to connect with God, each other, and ourselves, and find in Jesus a new way of being human and alive in the world.

**you're welcome, wanted, and accepted.  
join us on the journey.**

Red Deer Lake United Church  
96187 Hwy 22X W  
Foothills, AB T1S 2R9  
e: [office@reddeerlakeuc.com](mailto:office@reddeerlakeuc.com)  
p: 403-256-3181  
w: [reddeerlakeuc.com](http://reddeerlakeuc.com)

 [@RedDeerLakeUC](https://twitter.com/RedDeerLakeUC)  
 [red deer lake united church](https://www.facebook.com/reddeerlakeunitedchurch)

**our staff & ministry team:**

**minister**

Rev. Nick Coates  
[nick@reddeerlakeuc.com](mailto:nick@reddeerlakeuc.com)

**congregational care counsellor**

Vi Sharpe  
[ccare@reddeerlakeuc.com](mailto:ccare@reddeerlakeuc.com)

**music director**

Antonina Cox  
[music@reddeerlakeuc.com](mailto:music@reddeerlakeuc.com)

**children's ministry coordinator**

Mandi Stapleton  
[kids@reddeerlakeuc.com](mailto:kids@reddeerlakeuc.com)

**administrative coordinator**

Colleen Micklethwaite  
[office@reddeerlakeuc.com](mailto:office@reddeerlakeuc.com)

**communications & marketing**

**administrator**

Katherine Matiko  
[info@reddeerlakeuc.com](mailto:info@reddeerlakeuc.com)

**custodian**

Bill Holman

**CHURCH OFFICE HOURS:**

Monday 9am - noon  
Tuesday 9am - noon  
Wednesday 9am - noon  
Thursday 9am - noon

*The church office will be closed beginning  
December 24. The office will reopen on  
January 4.*